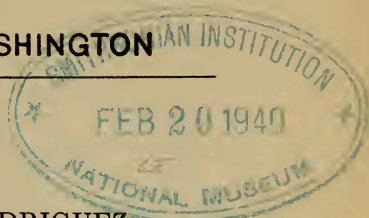


PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
BIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON



EXTINCT CHOUGH FROM RODRIGUEZ.

BY THE MARQUESS HACHISUKA, PH. D., SC. D.

The anonymous author of "R lation de l' le Rodrigue," written in 1760, and preserved in Paris, gives the following description, freely translated into English:—"A little bird is found which is not very common, for it is not found on the mainland. One sees it on the *islet au M t*, which is to the south of the main island, and I believe it keeps to that islet on account of the birds of prey which are on the mainland, as also to feed with more facility on the eggs of the fishing birds which feed there, for they feed on nothing else but eggs or some turtles dead of hunger, which they well know how to tear out of their shells. These birds are a little larger than a black-bird, and have white plumage, part of the wings and tail black, the beak yellow as well as the feet, and make a wonderful warbling. I say a warbling, since they have many and altogether different notes. We brought up some with cooked meat, cut up very small, which they eat in preference to seeds."

Prof. Newton, in *Proc. Zool. Soc.*, p. 41, 1875, says "I am at a loss to conjecture what these birds were unless possibly some form allied to *Fregilupus*," but obviously this can not be so because this Starling is confined to R union and all the authors who mentioned this bird are struck by its peculiar crest, which caused its confusion with Hoopoe, *Upupa*. So far it was believed that Rodriguez had its representative Starling in two species of *Necropsar*. We know definitely that the "little bird" of the anonymous writer has a carnivorous habit and it is impossible to place it among the Starlings, while we know that *Fregilupus*, in captivity, lived on bananas, potatoes, cabbages, and the like.

In 1879, G nther and Newton described *Necropsar rodericanus* in *Philos. Trans.*, vol. 168, pp. 4-7, from the osseous specimens collected by the Rev. H. H. Slater. They thought that their bird was the same as the "little bird" of the anonymous author, but it can not be so because *Necrop-*

was entirely frugivorous and not omnivorous; its bill shows clearly that it was not an implement to tear out the flesh of dead turtles. Lord Rothschild repeated the same mistake in his "Extinct Birds" by accepting Günther and Newton's view, reconstructing the bird in color. *Necropsar rodericanus* is only known from fragmentary remains of the skeleton, and its coloration is not known, therefore the "little bird" of the anonymous author still remains unidentified.

This bird can not be very well referred to the birds of prey because the author states, "on account of the birds of prey which are on the mainland." What would be the bird to fit into this description after both Starlings and the birds of prey are excluded? It must be a bird that has the carrion habit, and is an enemy of the hawks. This would seem to point to the crow-tribe, and more specifically to the habits of the Yellow-billed Chough, *Pyrrhonorax graculus*. This bird is found in the mountains of Europe and Asia, as well as Morocco, but often along the coast, where it is rocky. It is as a rule common in certain localities and has a very striking note which can be heard from a great distance; it circles high in the air in large flocks. In the Himalayas it is as familiar and noisy in the neighborhood of villages and camping grounds as the Common House Crow in India. Its food is similar to that of the crows, and the passage, "cooked meat, cut up very small which they eat in preference to seeds," describes its diet very clearly. They must have been the habitual raiders of the turtles as well as the eggs of birds laid on the ground. We already know that a Flightless Blue Land Rail, *Erythromachus lequati*, also found in Rodriguez, ate nothing but land tortoises' eggs and was known to become extremely fat.

We have come to the point of examining the plumage of the bird. Genus *Pyrrhonorax* is entirely black; one species has a yellow bill and another red, but neither has white plumage on any part of the body. Therefore the description, "little larger than a blackbird" can not fit into any known member of *Pyrrhonorax* as they are considerably larger than blackbirds. In Australia, we have a small crow, *Coccorax melanorhamphus*, sometimes called the White-winged Chough. Its bi-colored plumage makes me think of the Rodriguez bird but the Australian bird has more arboreal habits and is not seen near the coast or on rocky islands. Among the Family *Corvidæ* found from the Indian region, I can not think of any small member close to this except a desert inhabiting *Podoces*, which is found from Turkestan as far as northern Tibet. Its plumage matches extremely well with the sand, and the habit is entirely terrestrial and not arboreal. In the classification, *Pyrrhonorax* and *Podoces* are placed next to each other.

We have enough material, in my opinion, to suppose that the Rodriguez bird must be an aberrant small member of the crow-tribe, and I conclude that it must have been an aberrant Chough.

Therefore I propose to call it

TESTUDOPHAGA, gen. nov.

The present bird forms one of the smallest groups in the *Corvidæ* or crow family. It is a little larger than a blackbird; color of the plumage white;

portion of the wing and tail black; the genus is confined to Rodriguez. The genotype and only included species is

***Testudophaga bicolor*, sp. nov.**

THE BI-COLORED CHOUGH.

The present Chough resembles the Yellow-billed Chough, *Pyrhacorax graculus* by having the beak and feet yellow; the plumage is entirely white except the portion of the wing and tail, which is black. It was observed only by the anonymous author, one of the two contemporary visitors to the island. The species was very tame and had no fear of man. When the food supply, chiefly dead turtles and eggs of birds, became scarce, this bird became extinct and we have not heard of it since 1760.